



Communication and Memory in Turkish Culture: An Archaeological and Ethnographic Study of Rock Paintings and Symbols

Türk Kültüründe İletişim ve Bellek: Kaya Resimleri ve Sembollerin Arkeolojik ve Etnografik İncelemesi

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the origins and evolution of communication and memory phenomena in Turkish culture through an archaeological and ethnographic examination of rock art and symbols. Unlike traditional approaches, this study treats rock art not merely as an aesthetic form of expression but also as a complex symbolic system through which cultural knowledge and collective memory are transmitted from generation to generation. In this context, it is argued that rock paintings and petroglyphs found in Turkey and Central Asia encode a wide range of information, from social hierarchies to hunting practices, and from mythological narratives to ritual ceremonies. The main thesis of the article is that these visual languages played a critical role in constructing the identities, historical perceptions, and worldviews of communities in periods prior to written language. The research methodology offers a holistic perspective by combining archaeological data on rock art (chronology, geographical distribution, and technical analyses) with modern ethnographic studies (the symbolic systems and oral narratives of surviving traditional communities). This integrated approach demonstrates that rock art is more than a static relic; it is part of a living and dynamic cultural memory archive. Ultimately, this study aims to reveal the depth and complexity of the oral and visual communication networks at the roots of Turkish culture within a scientific framework.

Keywords: Turkish Culture, Cultural Memory, Symbolism, Rock Art, Archaeological Ethnology.

ÖZET

Bu makale, Türk kültüründe iletişim ve bellek olgularının kökenlerini ve evrimini, kaya resimleri ve sembollerin arkeolojik ve etnografik bir incelemesi aracılığıyla araştırmaktadır. Geleneksel yaklaşımların aksine, bu çalışma kaya sanatını sadece estetik bir ifade biçimi olarak değil, aynı zamanda kültürel bilgi aktarımının ve kolektif belleğin nesilden nesile aktarıldığı karmaşık bir sembolik sistem olarak ele almaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Türkiye ve Orta Asya coğrafyasında yer alan kaya resimlerinin ve petrogliflerin, sosyal hiyerarşilerden avcılık pratiklerine, mitolojik anlatılardan ritüel seremonilere kadar geniş bir bilgi yelpazesini şifrelediği ileri sürülmektedir. Makalenin temel tezi, bu görsel dillerin, yazılı dilden önceki dönemlerde toplulukların kimliklerini, tarih algılarını ve dünya görüşlerini inşa etmede kritik bir rol oynadığıdır. Araştırma metodolojisi, kaya resimlerinin arkeolojik verilerini (kronoloji, coğrafi dağılım ve teknik analizler) modern etnografik çalışmalarla (hayatta kalan geleneksel toplumların sembolik sistemleri ve sözlü anlatıları) harmanlayarak bütüncül bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır. Bu entegre yaklaşım sayesinde, kaya sanatının statik bir kalıntı olmaktan öte, yaşayan ve dinamik bir kültürel bellek arşivinin parçası olduğu gösterilmektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, Türk kültürünün köklerindeki sözlü ve görsel iletişim ağlarının derinliğini ve karmaşıklığını bilimsel bir çerçevede ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Kültürü, Kültürel Bellek, Sembolizm, Kaya Resimleri, Arkeo-etnoloji.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, communication has been of vital importance for communities to sustain their existence and pass on their cultural heritage to future generations. Traditionally, written texts have been considered the most prominent means of this transmission; however, in periods when writing did not exist or was not widespread, visual symbols and art forms fulfilled this function. In this context, rock paintings are not merely simple drawings made for aesthetic purposes, but also deserve to be studied as visual texts that refer to hunting practices (Çoruhlu and Arseven, 2011: 45), ritual practices, and social hierarchies (Gürçay, 2015: 112). This study argues that rock paintings in the Turkish cultural geography are both historical records and repositories of social memory.

The focus of this article is to evaluate the content, symbolism, and context of rock art using an interdisciplinary approach. Archaeological data sheds light on the chronology, geographical distribution, and techniques of rock art,

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while ethnographic studies allow us to establish possible connections between the oral traditions, mythological narratives, and symbolic systems of contemporary Turkish and Central Asian peoples and the rock art of the past (Ural, 2018: 78). This holistic approach ensures that rock paintings are interpreted not as static relics of the past, but as part of a living cultural tradition. For example, linking the horned animal figures in some rock paintings to the roots of belief systems such as “Alplik” and “Shamanism” that exist among contemporary Turkish peoples is an example of the in-depth analysis provided by this approach. The article aims to reveal the common symbolic language and cultural continuities across this vast geography by comparing rock paintings in Turkey (e.g., in the Erzurum, Kars, and Hakkari regions) and Central Asia (particularly in Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan). This examination will also help us understand how visual communication enabled Turkish culture to establish connections across geographies from its earliest periods. By redefining the place of rock art in Turkish cultural history, this study demonstrates that cultural memory is not only preserved in written sources but also in visual and symbolic languages..

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON ROCK ART

This section will discuss the theoretical approaches used in the study of rock art. Unlike traditional approaches (such as the “art for art’s sake” or “hunter-sorcerer” theories), this study will be based on *symbolic anthropology* and *cultural memory* theories. It will be emphasized that rock paintings are not merely pictures but a system of symbols, and that the meanings of these symbols can be interpreted within the cultural context of the community.

This section, which forms the foundation of the article, presents the theoretical and methodological approaches used in the analysis of rock paintings and symbols. For many years, rock art has been approached primarily through aesthetic or ritualistic lenses by the disciplines of art history and archaeology. Theories such as the “hunting magic hypothesis” (Gürçay, 2015: 32) and “art for art’s sake” have interpreted these works either as reflections of the daily life practices of hunter-gatherer communities or as creations meant solely to satisfy aesthetic tastes. However, such reductionist approaches fall short in explaining the deeper cultural and cognitive dimensions embedded in rock art.

This study aims to move beyond the surface-level interpretations of rock art by evaluating it within the framework of cultural memory and communication theories. In this context, the concept of *cultural memory*, inspired by the work of Jan Assmann, is placed at the center. According to Assmann, cultural memory is the collection of collectively shared memories, myths, rituals, and symbolic systems that sustain a society’s identity and continuity. This memory is transmitted primarily through visual and oral means, especially in societies without written traditions (Assmann, 2011: 50). Rock paintings perfectly align with this definition; they serve as memory repositories that preserve and transmit a community’s shared history, beliefs, and social norms by inscribing them onto stone surfaces. Each symbol functions like a “visual text,” containing within it a story, an identity, or a social rule.

The paper also draws on the discipline of *symbolic anthropology*. This approach argues that symbols do not have a single universal meaning; rather, the meaning of each symbol can be interpreted within its cultural context. Therefore, an animal figure depicted in rock art may represent far more than a simple hunting scene—it could signify a tribal totem, a spiritual guide, or a mythological being. To interpret rock paintings accurately, it is essential to consider them alongside the social, economic, and religious structures of the communities that produced them. This necessity highlights the importance of ethnographic approaches that examine the cultural practices of living communities, in addition to archaeological findings. Finally, this study adopts an *interdisciplinary methodology*. Archaeological data (such as the dating, geographical distribution, and technical analysis of rock paintings), ethnographic data (including the oral traditions, myths, and belief systems of modern Turkish and Central Asian communities), and the theoretical framework (cultural memory and symbolic anthropology) are brought together to provide a holistic and in-depth analysis of rock art. This integrated approach aims to demonstrate that rock paintings are not merely remnants of the past, but also integral components of a living cultural heritage.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AND GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

This section provides an in-depth examination of the archaeological data and spatial distribution of rock art found within the broad geographical boundaries of Turkish cultural geography. Rock art is considered not merely as the local heritage of a single region, but as tangible evidence of a communication network stretching from the Eurasian steppes to the depths of Anatolia.

Focusing on the period between the 2nd millennium BC and the 1st millennium AD, this article comparatively analyzes the common motifs, stylistic similarities, and symbolic continuities found in rock art across different

geographical areas. This process plays a critical role in illuminating the roots of Turkish culture and early migration routes.

Rock Art in Anatolia and the Caucasus: Civilizations Serving as Bridges

Turkey's eastern regions serve as a bridge between Asia and Europe, making them an area of intense cultural interaction. *The Kozan Rock Paintings* in Erzurum and *the Türkmənli Rock Paintings* in Kars are among the most important archaeological finds in this region. These paintings are particularly notable for motifs such as deer, mountain goats, and hunter figures. Symbolically, the mountain goat figure represents not only a game animal but also fertility, power, and sometimes a spiritual guide. The stylistic similarity of these figures to their counterparts in Central Asia points to a shared cultural memory and aesthetic understanding (Çoruh and Arseven, 2011: 48). The rock paintings discovered in the Geçitli Valley (Piro) in Hakkari represent a different dimension. The schematic human figures and geometric patterns in these paintings refer more to ritualistic and mythological narratives than to everyday hunting scenes. These symbols function as a “visual archive” reflecting the community's belief system, cosmology, and social hierarchy.

Thanks to the interpretation of symbols and icons, Turkish culture has become more clearly explainable in the 21st century. In this context, many disciplines are conducting research to document the existence of Turkish culture by making evaluations based on their own content. Similarly, in terms of plastic arts, it is crucial that productions are made and that the resulting works are examined and incorporated into the literature. However, there is a lack of studies in this regard (Bayrak and Şenol, 2022: 58).

The distinct schematization of the hands and feet in some of the figures in the Piro paintings indicates that these paintings reflect an abstract and symbolic language rather than naturalistic art. This reveals that even in eastern Anatolia, there is a structure similar to the symbolic coding system we see in Central Asia (Uysal, 2017: 115).

Rock Art in the Central Asian Steppes: The Cultural Roots of the Turks

Rock art stands out for its richness and diversity in Central Asia, the heart of the Turkish cultural geography. Regions such as the *Altai Mountains* in Mongolia, *Tanbaly* in Kazakhstan, and *Saimaluu-Tash* in Kyrgyzstan contain the most concentrated and impressive examples of rock art. The petroglyphs in these regions serve as visual records of nomadic lifestyles, belief systems, and daily practices. The rock paintings found in Mongolia's Altai Mountains are particularly rich in animal figures such as horses and camels. The horse is not only a means of transportation and warfare, but also holds a sacred position in Turkic mythology as a spiritual guide and a being that bridges the underworld and the sky. Horse figures in rock art are often depicted alongside hunters using bows and arrows, reflecting the community's survival strategies and warrior identity. The Tanbalı Petroglyphs in Kazakhstan are listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List for their complex compositions and various symbols. Among the images here, the “sun-headed figures” are noteworthy. These figures are associated with the sun cult and concept of god in ancient Turkic belief systems. The warrior figures, mounted hunters, and shamanistic symbols at Tanbalı provide unique data for understanding the socio-political structure and religious beliefs of the period (Gürçay, 2015: 67). Saimaluu Tash in Kyrgyzstan is a massive open-air gallery containing tens of thousands of rock paintings. The paintings in this area cover a wide thematic range, from hunting scenes to ritual dances, agricultural activities to astronomical observations. In particular, the horned human figures and animal-human hybrid creatures are visual expressions of shamanistic beliefs and the relationship with supernatural powers.

Comparative Analysis: Shared Motifs and Cultural Continuity

A detailed comparison of rock art in Anatolia and Central Asia provides strong evidence that the Turkic peoples spread across this vast geography shared a common cultural memory and symbolic system. The recurring motifs of mountain goats, deer, wolves, and the sun in both regions are the most prominent indicators of this cultural connection. The mythological and symbolic meanings of these animals are also reflected in similar ways in oral traditions and epics. This situation reinforces the argument that rock art should be accepted as a visual record of a nation's cultural identity and history. This section supports, with archaeological data, the view that rock art is not merely a local phenomenon in Turkish culture, but rather a trans-regional communication network and cultural heritage.

ETHNOGRAPHIC PARALLELS: TRACES OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT AND THE CONTINUITY OF CULTURAL MEMORY

This section thoroughly examines the unique opportunities offered by ethnographic approaches to deciphering the meanings of rock paintings and symbols within the Turkish cultural landscape. Although rock art is generally perceived as a static relic dating back thousands of years, modern ethnographic studies show that these symbols and

the belief systems associated with them still live on in the oral traditions and cultural practices of today's Turkish and Central Asian peoples. In this context, the bridge established between archaeological data and contemporary ethnographic observations offers a new and in-depth perspective on the symbolic world of the past. This section seeks the living cultural traces of the symbols in rock paintings, particularly in the context of shamanistic beliefs, mythological narratives, and ritual practices.

Shamanism and the Symbolic World

Horned figures, depictions of people holding drums, and animal-human hybrid creatures frequently found in rock paintings can be directly linked to the shamanistic belief systems of the ancient Turks. Shamanism is a belief system based on communicating with supernatural powers, healing illnesses, and maintaining the spiritual balance of the community. The shaman is the central figure in this system, acting as a bridge between the underworld and the sky world. The horned figures in rock paintings usually symbolize the animal spirits that shamans transform into during their spiritual journeys. For example, the deer antlers used in the ceremonial clothing worn by shamans in Siberia symbolize the shaman's possession of the power and spirit of this animal. Similarly, the deer and horned mountain goat figures seen in rock paintings in Mongolia and the Altai Mountains are a reflection of animal cults in the shamanic practices of hunter-gatherer communities (Eliade, 2012: 187). The drum is one of the most fundamental elements of shamanic rituals. The figures holding drums in rock paintings symbolize the transition into trance and the journey to spiritual realms. This motif has a cultural continuity that extends to the use of drums in some folk dances and rituals in Anatolia. Ural (2018: 125) argues that such figures are a visual expression of the ancient Turks' quest to transcend the boundaries between the earthly and spiritual realms.

Mythological Stories and Animal Symbolism

In Turkish mythology, animals are not merely natural beings but also play a central role in numerous narratives, from creation myths to tales of heroism. **Wolf** is a sacred and guiding animal representing the ancestral origins of the Turks. Wolf figures, rarely found in rock paintings, bear parallels to Turkish mythological narratives such as the “Ertuğrul Saga.” The mountain goat is associated with fertility and the spirit of the mountains. According to the beliefs of hunter communities in Central Asia, hunting mountain goats is not only a physical activity but also a ritual of communicating with the spirit of the mountain and asking for fertility. Similarly, the horse figure has been seen not only as a vital symbol of the nomadic lifestyle and warrior identity of the Turkic peoples, but also as a spiritual being ascending to the sky. The “Manas Epic” and other Turkic epics tell of horses rescuing heroes from difficult situations, guiding them, and even carrying them to the sky. The abundance of figures depicting horsemen and horses alone in Central Asian rock paintings is a visual reflection of the horse's sacred and mythological role.

Ritual Practices and Oral Traditions

Rock paintings are considered not merely static images but also integral parts of dynamic ritual practices. The selection of rock surfaces, the placement of the paintings, and the surrounding archaeological findings indicate that these sites were not ordinary locations but sacred spaces. Rituals performed in these areas helped preserve the vitality of the paintings and their place in the collective memory of the community. Mythological stories recounted during oral traditions and festivals of present-day Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples show striking similarities to the scenes depicted in the rock art. Depictions of a hunting tale or a shaman's spiritual journey in oral narratives often correspond directly to figures found in the rock paintings. This supports the hypothesis that before the widespread use of written culture, oral traditions were transmitted with the aid of visual supports. In this context, rock paintings served as mnemonic devices that facilitated the easier recall of oral stories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper demonstrate that the rock paintings and symbols found within the Turkish cultural geography are not merely archaeological relics, but also dynamic cultural tools that play a critical role in the formation of collective memory, communication, and identity. Archaeological and ethnographic studies have revealed that this visual heritage encoded the socio-cultural structure, beliefs, and worldviews of communities in periods prior to written language.

The theoretical framework discussed herein offers a holistic perspective on rock art, moving beyond reductive approaches such as “art for art's sake” and drawing on symbolic anthropology and cultural memory theories. This approach demonstrates that each motif in rock paintings serves as a carrier of information and a “visual text” laden with meaning. Animal figures such as mountain goats, deer, and wolves are reflections of mythological narratives, shamanistic beliefs, and totemic symbols that define the identity of the community, beyond hunting practices. The “sun-headed figures” and depictions of horsemen, particularly found in Central Asia, point to the existence of a complex symbolism reflecting the Turks' celestial beliefs and nomadic lifestyle. The stylistic and motif similarities

between rock paintings in Anatolia and their Central Asian counterparts are concrete evidence of the strong cultural ties established between these regions thousands of years ago. In this context, it has been concluded that rock art served as a communication network facilitating the transmission of knowledge and beliefs along the early migration routes of Turkish culture.

One of the strongest arguments in the paper is the parallels drawn between archaeological evidence and the ethnographic data of modern Turkish and Central Asian peoples. The shamanistic elements and animal symbolism frequently seen in rock paintings still live on in the oral traditions, mythological narratives, and folk beliefs of modern Turkish culture. This demonstrates that rock art is not merely a tradition of the past, but also a living cultural heritage. These ethnographic data provide archaeologists and art historians with a unique guide to interpreting rock paintings, enabling us to understand that they are part of a complex cultural coding system rather than merely superficial depictions of hunting. In this context, rock paintings can be regarded as “memory aids” that visually embody the collective memory of a nation.

The findings of this article add a new dimension to Turkish cultural history research. Rock art is more than just an archaeological object; it is a unique source for understanding the common cultural roots, identities, and worldviews of the Turkish peoples. However, there are significant challenges in preserving and studying this heritage. Weather conditions, natural erosion, and human-induced damage threaten rock paintings. Therefore, it is crucial to take steps such as the following:

Inventory Creation and Digital Documentation: A detailed inventory of all rock paintings and symbols must be created and preserved for future generations using 3D scanning and digital documentation techniques.

Encouraging Interdisciplinary Research: Supporting studies conducted through the collaboration of various disciplines—such as archaeology, ethnology, folklore, linguistics, and art history—will contribute to a more holistic understanding of rock art.

Raising Public Awareness: Educating local communities and tourists about the importance of this cultural heritage plays a vital role in preventing its destruction. Conservation and educational programs can greatly support this process.

International Cooperation: Joint research projects between Turkey and Central Asian countries on rock art can help foster a deeper understanding of the cultural continuity across this vast region.

In conclusion, rock art is a visual memory of Turkish culture. Examining this memory provides us with a valuable window not only into the past but also into understanding the roots of our contemporary identity and cultural codes. This paper aims to draw attention to the scientific and cultural significance of rock art, contributing to ensuring that this unique heritage receives the attention it deserves and is passed on to future generations.

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